THE EVOLUTION OF CIGARETTE ADS

Tobacco ads prove adaptable with times

By Doug Levy
USA TODAY

Tobacco companies may be ready to radically limit their advertising and promotion practices, but history shows the industry is extraordinarily skillful at adapting to political, social and scientific change.

A review of tobacco ads since the 1940s shows how cigarette companies have shifted from fatherly images of well-known TV doctors to more abstract messages reflecting the lifestyle smokers might want.

And ads from countries such as Canada and France give a glimpse of what tobacco advertising might be like if the companies ultimately accept marketing restrictions as part of a settlement of anti-tobacco litigation.

Among restrictions likely to take hold: a ban on icons such as the Marlboro Man and Joe Camel. For the tobacco industry, the change merely would be another turn in its decades-old effort to market products that cause cancer and heart disease.

One way companies adapted over time was to eliminate any explicit mentions about health effects — and to show smokers as active but not necessarily athletic, says Rick Pollay, a professor of marketing at the University of British Columbia.

"Once people were aware that there was some reasonable science indicating health problems, (tobacco companies) moved almost entirely to non-verbal or visual imagery. We have pictures of health instead of verbal claims," says Pollay, a consultant to several lawyers pressing anti-tobacco cases.

Those shifts were brought on not by the industry but under government pressure, says researcher John Calfee of the American Enterprise Institute. "There's not much you can say about a cigarette these days. The government progressively removed most of the information that would be useful."

Federal Trade Commission actions since the 1950s, Calfee says, restricted such things as how tobacco companies advertised tar and nicotine levels.

THE 1940s

In May 1942, R.J. Reynolds Tobacco, told doctors in a medical journal ad, "Nicotine is the chief component of pharmacologic and physiologic significance in cigarette smoke."

The two-page ad describes how "slower-burning" Camel cigarettes "produce less nicotine in the smoke" and therefore might be better for patients who are seeking smoking "pleasure."

It also says tests with nicotine show that it causes a "profound" increase in blood pressure. High blood pressure is a risk factor for strokes and heart attacks.

"Ads emphasized symptoms — (sore) throats, irritation, coughing and overall protection against the effects of smoking," says Debra Ringold, marketing professor at Willamette University. "There was much emphasis on approval of certain brands by physicians themselves."

By Michael Stravato, AP, for USA TODAY

Doctors say: This May 1942 ad taken from 'The Medical Woman's Journal' reflects a move toward getting physicians' approval of brands, in this case, Camel.

THE 1950s

In the early 1950s, researchers began strongly linking cigarettes with lung cancer. Tobacco companies responded both in brand and cooperative advertising. Brand ads touted differences in the levels of tar and nicotine, the two culprits blamed for ill health effects. In a cooperative ad placed in newspapers nationwide, the tobacco industry announced the formation of a research group to study health risks of smoking.

"We believe the products we make are not injurious to health," the ad said. "We accept an interest in people's health as a basic responsibility, paramount to every other consideration in our business."

Many brand ads in the 1950s were "fear-related," Ringold says. "Manufacturers were constantly trying to reassure smokers that while smoking was hazardous, their brand was less hazardous."

But the result was many people steered clear of tobacco, he says.

For the first time in decades, cigarette consumption was on a sustained downward trend.

Health concerns: Companies began to reassure consumers their brands were less hazardous than rivals'.

THE 1960s

Reacting to growing concern in Congress about cigarette marketing practices and smoking among youth, tobacco companies stopped promoting cigarettes to students and announced a voluntary advertising code.

Among other provisions, the code bars use of athletes and young models in cigarette ads, restricts distribution of samples and forbids explicit health claims.

A Surgeon General's warning that smoking may be "hazardous to your health" was added on cigarette packs.

Self-imposed codes: Tobacco companies agreed to move away from using athletes and young models in their ads.

THE 1970s

The tobacco industry agreed to include the Surgeon General's warnings in all ads, while researchers in both industry and government began research on how to make cigarettes safer.

TV and radio ads were banned in 1971.

The effort to reduce tar and nicotine led to what some call the "tar derby," when each company tried to position its brands as lower in tar than others.

The result, Calfee says, was "a new wave of advertising about what to worry about."

Ads for new brands promoted low-tar characteristics. For example, when Reynolds launched Camel Lights, ads proclaimed the brand "the solution" to finding a low-tar cigarette that tasted good.

By Michael Stravato, AP, for USA TODAY

Light my fire: Companies became more competitive in terms of tar and nicotine content, introducing 'light' cigarettes that retained taste. The Surgeon General's warning also began to appear, as seen in this two-page magazine ad for Camel lights.

THE 1980s

Image advertising reached new creative heights in the 1980s.

"You typically see bold and lively behavior in pure and pristine environments," says Pollay. But the figures are involved in "moderate" activities such as mountain biking. More active images would trigger questions about cigarettes and health, he says.

Houston physician Alan Blum, who has collected and studied tobacco advertising for decades, says arguments to restrict tobacco advertising are missing an important fact: that tobacco marketing encompasses more than just conventional ads.

"Advertising constitutes a far broader range of activity seldom covered in legislated bans, such as political lobbying and corporate underwriting of sporting organizations, cultural institutions and educational programs," says Blum, founder of Doctors Ought to Care (DOC), an anti-tobacco group. Blum notes that smoking rates remain high even in places that enacted ad bans.

During this time, tobacco companies dramatically increased spending on promotional activities such as auto-racing sponsorship.

No average Joe: The first Joe Camel ad appeared in 1988. More ads featured smokers involved in moderate activities in pristine environments.

THE 1990s

Anti-tobacco activism increases. Health groups blame campaigns such as Joe Camel for increasing youth smoking.

The Food and Drug Administration declares nicotine in tobacco an addictive drug, and in 1996 issues rules to restrict tobacco sales and advertising.

A federal judge blocks ad restrictions this year, but the industry offers to accept the restrictions as part of a deal to settle mounting liability lawsuits.

In a separate settlement, Liggett Group labels its cigarettes "addictive."

Other tobacco companies offer to withdraw icons such as Joe Camel and the Marlboro Man and human figures from advertising in exchange for liability limits to settle lawsuits brought by states and private lawyers.

Ads in Canada, Europe and other places where similar limits already exist take on abstract tones.

Some Marlboro ads show black-and-white images of the Southwest with only the sun's glow in Marlboro red.

In Canada, where brand-name sponsorship of sports and cultural events is prohibited, tobacco companies form new corporations for each cigarette brand. The result: events such as the Benson & Hedges fireworks festival, named after the Benson & Hedges Corp., not the cigarette brand.

In France, ads for cigarette-brand items such as lighters, matches, boots and clothing appear.

Above photo by Michael Stravato, AP, for USA TODAY

Getting the boot: In countries that have restrictions on cigarette advertising, some companies promote products carrying their brand name. The French see ads for Camel boots and Marlboro lighters.

Ads photographed by Michael Stravato, AP, for USA TODAY, and courtesy of Doctors Ought to Care, Debra Ringold/Willamette University, Trone Advertising and Non-Smokers Rights Association of Canada.

By Michael Stravato, AP, for USA TODAY

Museum makings: From print ads to videotapes, Alan Blum, left, and Eric Solberg collect and store tobacco-related materials.

Museum plans to clear air on smoking

By Doug Levy
USA TODAY

HOUSTON — Their dream is to build "a museum about when people used to smoke."

But Alan Blum and Eric Solberg bristle when people lump them into the same category as other anti-tobacco activists. They reject what they consider the revisionist history of the anti-tobacco movement.

"When you discover that the American Medical Association (AMA) was at one time working and collaborating with the tobacco companies, that changes the picture," says Solberg, executive director of DOC, which stands for Doctors Ought to Care. "Our goal is to put out the whole truth."

> "There was a lot of information (about smoking and disease) even before the Surgeon General's report. People have forgotten about it."
>
> — Eric Solberg, Doctors Ought to Care

Blum, a family physician and DOC founder, has been collecting tobacco-related materials for decades. Much of it is stacked in his family's garage, dozens of boxes are in a tiny office at the Baylor College of Medicine, and scores more are in DOC's small suite in a Houston office building.

The collection includes everything from news clippings and print ads to videotapes of sporting events featuring tobacco-sponsored participants. Among Blum's gems are store displays for the failed "Dakota" cigarette brand that was aimed at what R.J. Reynolds called "virile females" and an extensive assortment of ads for tobacco-backed products around the world.

If the museum is built, Blum hopes anti-smoking crusaders will realize their own missteps as the cigarette and health debate has proceeded.

"Before you go about demanding retribution, you owe it to yourself to ask, 'How could that have happened in the first place?'" says Blum, pointing out stacks of memos, ads and other materials showing the cozy relationship between organizations such as the AMA and the major tobacco companies.

He's put together a display at the Texas Medical Center library that shows how tobacco companies were major advertisers in medical journals and how even the editor of one major journal consulted with the Tobacco Institute before running an editorial about smoking and health.

That is the kind of display Blum envisions in the DOC museum. Groundbreaking could be next year if fund-raising goes well.